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RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2960
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000084

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKMENSITAN: GENERAL PETRAEUS MEETING WITH
TURKMEN FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: ASHGABAT 0083

Classified By: Charge Richard Miles, per reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. On January 16, following his conversation with Turkmen President Berdimuhamedov, CENTCOM Commander Petraeus, accompanied by Charge Miles, met for an hour and a half with Turkmen Foreign Minister Meredov. The Minister was accompanied by the Ministry's North American Office Chief Bashimov. The Minister began with a lengthy description of the various ways in which Turkmenistan supported the U.S. and coalition effort in Afghanistan. When he began what looked to be an even lengthier description of Turkmenistan's policy of "positive neutrality," the General interrupted and forced the conversation into an intense discussion of the underlying issues behind the Turkmen unwillingness to interpret "positive neutrality" in a way which would allow Turkmenistan to participate in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). The ensuing discussion defies summarization. Suffice to say that the U.S. position was made very clear and the two sides agreed to continue to work on the issue. The General was able to get the Minister to agree to look into the "Gas and Go" situation at Ashgabat Airport personally. While intense, the discussion on NDN was extremely useful and, hopefully, laid some serious ground for later resolution of this issue. End Summary.

12. (C) The Foreign Minister began by giving a high assessment of the earlier meeting between his President and the General. He asked General Petraeus to have "understanding" for the Turkmen approach. He then gave a lengthy description of the various ways in which Turkmenistan has supported the U.S. and NATO's effort in Afghanistan. Some of these measures, he said, mentioning the U.S. air corridor in particular, were negotiated by himself personally with his American colleagues. We understand the U.S. mission in Afghanistan, the Minister emphasized, and we want to work cooperatively with the U.S. to improve security in Afghanistan. We are also working with you, he continued, to improve security on a broader scale, noting, as an example, the U.S. has helped us build several border control points including on the border with Iran. We cooperate on narcotics interdiction, and we have actively supported President Bush's Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). The Minister said President Berdimuhamedov had asked him to bring the PSI matter to the General's attention. General Petraeus said

that he was familiar with Turkmenistan's efforts. We are grateful, he said, but, he added, these efforts are in Turkmenistan's interest also.

¶3. (C) The Minister then said that there were certain actions which Turkmenistan could not take. As he was about to launch into what appeared to be a lengthy explanation of the Turkmen policy of "positive neutrality," the General interrupted. "I can be a diplomat or I can be a soldier," he said. "I was a diplomat with President Berdimuhamedov," he continued, "now let me be a soldier. This refusal to allow the land shipment of civilian, commercial cargo just doesn't work." "By the way," he went on, "let's get this 'Gas and Go' problem solved. We've got the money. Your airport people will make money out of the re-fueling. Let's get this problem fixed before we start patting ourselves on the back over our successful cooperation." Give me a "Da," he told the Minister.

¶4. (C) The General continued. "Let's be honest," he said, "you have a convenient policy behind which you are hiding. I understand this. But my soldiers are fighting and dying for a cause which you say you support. You say you don't want the Taliban to return to power. You don't want extremist groups in Afghanistan. And yet you are not helping us on this shipment of goods. Even Russia supports this. As a soldier, I want you to know what I'm thinking. I'm trying to rationalize what I heard this morning. You have a policy which you use when it's convenient to do so." The General added that it was very important for Turkmenistan to show

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some sign of increased cooperation as the new Presidential Administration takes office in Washington. Petraeus continued, "This is a fight against extremism. These people don't want me - or you - to worship the way we want. It's a struggle against extremism." Noting that the Minister was trained as a lawyer, Petraeus said that "viewed through this lens, the Turkmen case is unpersuasive." "How long does your neutrality last?" he asked and then continued, "Until they come across your border?"

¶5. (C) The Minister said, "It is good when people speak openly." He defended his description of the history of Turkmen support for the Allied effort in Afghanistan. These are our neighbors in Afghanistan, he said. We are concerned with extremism and with the narcotics traffic and with the conditions which create them. We are working together with you on this, he said. When we say "neutrality," the Minister explained, it doesn't mean we will sit aside and do nothing. The General interjected - "How can I explain to the Secretary of Defense that I can't even get the "Gas and Go" operation back on its feet after six months of inactivity?" The Minister said he would take that task on personally. Meredov then reiterated that Turkmen "positive neutrality" did not allow the delivery of civilian goods by land. Our law, he said, does not allow our involvement in military activities - even when setting up a civilian infrastructure. If these were "humanitarian" goods delivered by an international organization, that would be different, he said. In 2000-2001, Turkmenistan allowed land shipments of humanitarian goods under the aegis of the ICRC, the World Food Organization, and UNICEF. The General referred to the Charge's belief that it would have been better never to have asked in the first place but simply to have sent the goods by normal international shipping methods. This caused the Minister to bring up the now somewhat worn chestnut of a previous incident in which some Italian "provisions" transiting by land to Afghanistan were found to have contained wine. Comment. Even the Minister had a difficult time keeping a straight face when telling this story. End Comment.

¶6. (C) The General asked whether the Afghans could come into Turkmenistan and buy goods for transport back to Afghanistan. Why not, said the Minister. That would be a

bilateral matter. The conversation ended with an exchange on the importance of pipeline diversification and of western involvement in the exploitation of Turkmenistan's gas reserves.

17. (C) Comment. The Minister took the General's intensity in stride, and we are sure that both the substance and the passion of the discussion will be passed on to President Berdimuhamedov. While positive results can hardly be expected in the immediate future, it is likely that a certain amount of stone has been chipped away by the General's approach. We need to keep up the pressure finding leverage when and where we can. END COMMENT.

MILES